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Educational Colonialism

Michael Simonson

Colonialism is the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically. Education is the process of receiving or giving systematic, formal instruction, usually at a school or university—also, an enlightening experience involving teaching and learning.

So, is there such a thing as educational colonialism, which could be defined as the policy of acquiring full or partial control

over another country's educational system, occupying it with nonlocal teachers, and exploiting it educationally?

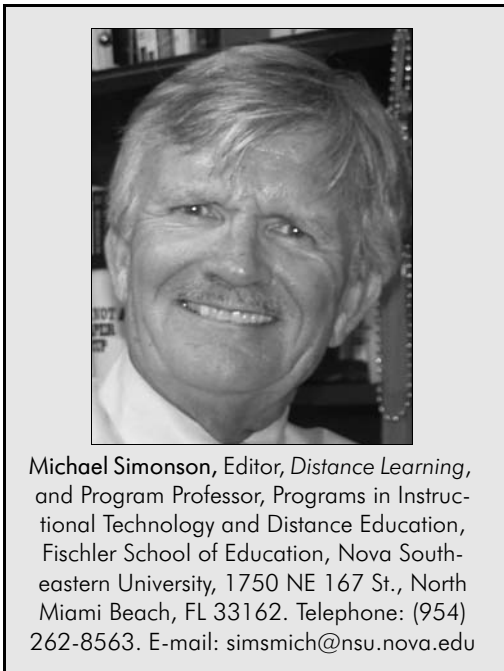
Distance education may be an example of educational colonialism, as the practice of teaching and learning at a distance seems to be the antithesis of local education. Yet, most readers of this journal probably think it may be possible to combine the advantages of distance education with local control of schools, colleges and universities.

The massive open online course is a notable application of distance education. MOOCs utilize the expertise of eminent scholars and teachers, often from the most prestigious universities, to offer world-class education to anyone in the world, sometimes for free.

Is it possible for the field of distance education to be tailored to meet local needs? Can distance education, defined as "institutionally based formal education with interactive telecommunications systems used to connect learners, instructors, and resources" (Schlosser & Simonson, 2009, p. 1) be community, region, or state based? Or, must distance education ultimately be a massive system?

Possibly we should be advocating a new approach to distance education—the localization of distance education. For that, another definition—of localization or local control—is needed. Here is what the Great

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Schools Partnership (2013) says about local control in education:

In education, local control refers to (1) the governing and management of public schools by elected or appointed representatives serving on governing bodies, such as school boards or school committees, that are located in the communities served by the schools, and (2) the degree to which local leaders, institutions, and governing bodies can make independent or autonomous decisions about the governance and operation of public schools. (para. 1)

The concept of local control is grounded in a philosophy of government premised on the belief that the individuals and institutions closest to the students and most knowledgeable about a school—and most invested in the welfare and success of its educators, students, and communities—are best suited to making important decisions related to its operation, leadership,

staffing, academics, teaching, and improvement.

Wow, an interesting situation. Distance education provides the promise of teaching and learning from the best people and places to nearly anyone, anywhere. Yet, there is considerable and important relevance to the local control of education, especially in the United States. Is localized distance education possible? Perhaps it is a topic worthy of study.

And finally, as Thomas Jefferson is purported to have said, perhaps written, “an educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a free people.”

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